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SEARCH



October 22, 2008

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BY FRANCENE CUCINELLO

Not up for debate

Talk about the epitome of arrogance.

Oh wait. They don't want to.

In what can only be referred to as "The Audacity of Hype," several of our esteemed sitting politicians have clammed up tighter than lines of consumer credit. They have flatly refused to debate their opponents — and they don't care who is upset about it.

Debates are a cornerstone of democracy. They are an American tradition. When candidates stand side by side engaging in spirited discourse, voters learn who they are and what they stand for. Free speech being exercised in a public forum should be embraced by all

— especially those who profess to believe in the Constitution.

Yet some of Kentucky's veteran politicians think they're so special they don't have to reapply for their jobs. These men aren't talking — at least not in forums where they have to risk being questioned.

Way to be a leader, Mr. United States Congressman, Mr. United States Senator.

Sen. Mitch McConnell declared he was "too busy" (translation: above such triviality) to attend a KET debate with Democratic opponent Bruce Lunsford. Despite numerous attempts by the station to accommodate the re-tread Republican windbag, McConnell decided to only grace the more Mitch-friendly Western Kentucky with his presence.

Many voters are already fed up with the disdain McConnell shows all but the richest of Kentuckians. More should follow suit.

Congressmen Ben Chandler, a Democrat, and Hal Rogers, a Republican, also skipped face-offs with their opponents. Granted, with the exception of the Senate race, the congressional challengers are pretty weak. Most are political newbies with nearly non-existent funding, little media savvy and few staffers.

Except money and experience shouldn't have any bearing on whether an opponent is worthy. One of the sitting pols said he blew off a debate because he didn't want to validate his opponent's candidacy. Really? I thought the Board of Elections had that job.

U.S. Rep. Geoff Davis, R-4th District, refused a KET debate invitation because, in his opinion, challenger Michael Kelley wasn't running a credible campaign. Kelley's a Harvard-educated physician. What's not credible? I've interviewed Kelley. He's a fiscal conservative who, if properly backed, could give Davis a run for his RNC money. I know I would have enjoyed hearing these two discuss the merits of universal healthcare and insurance reform.

Congressman John Yarmuth recently bowed out of a scheduled debate with Anne Northup at the Rotary Club due to an emergency hearing in Washington to discuss The Bailout. However, Louisvillians were able to hear him verbally spar with Northup at televised debates on Monday and Tuesday.

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Finally we come to Rep. Ed Whitfield, R-1st District, who not only refused to debate, but then lawyered up and demanded equal time after KET pressed on with the program and let reporters question Democratic opponent Heather Ryan.

Whitfield's attorney apparently has one powerful poker face. He cited FCC Section 315 and KET bought the bogus argument that it owed Whitfield equal airtime. The station let him air a six-minute taped statement touting his accomplishments.

Only the station didn't owe Whitfield squat. Since 1959, the FCC has provided a number of interpretations to Section 315 of the Equal Time Rule. Among them is a provision that plainly states debates are considered on-the-spot news events and are exempt from equal time law. That's why you often see debates featuring only a Republican and a Democrat and not third-party candidates.

Furthermore, Whitfield declined time on KET. Nobody denied him access.

Some challengers indeed might not deserve a congressional office, but none of these candidates ride giant bulls or endlessly pontificate about legalizing pot. What's the harm in spending an hour on statewide television sharing ideas, plans and platforms?

This trend of not debating in a forum as respected as the state's public television station sets a dangerous precedent. Haughty attitudes and senses of false superiority should never become the norm and certainly should not be rewarded with free publicity.

Politicians should be advised that their committee assignments and the amount of money they bring into Kentucky are becoming less and less relevant to voters.

Current officeholders should never summarily dismiss debates showcasing candidates. Political theater may have a lot of gray areas, but this one is simply not debatable.

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